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ABSTRACT

In this paper various sexist practices in the English language are discussed and feminist criticism of these practices is given. This criticism is analyzed in terms of the kinds of linguistic changes proposed and the extent to which these changes have taken hold, assessing the prospects for success of each type of change. Three particular linguistic features discussed are the use of "Miss" and "Mrs." as titles for women, the use of the formative "man," both as a free form to refer to all human beings and as a bound form in compounds, and the use of masculine singular pronouns "he"/"him"/"his" to refer to indefinites and generic nouns. (Author/CLK)

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FEMINIST CRITICISM OF LANGUAGE:

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

by

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Feminist criticism of language: a sociolinguistic perspective[1]

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss various sexist practices in the English language and give feminist criticism of these practices, analyzing this criticism in terms of the kinds of linguistic changes proposed and the extent to which these changes have taken hold, assessing the prospects for success of each type of change. Three particular linguistic features that we discuss are the use of Miss and Mrs. as titles for women, the use of the formative man, both as a free form to refer to all human beings and as a bound form in compounds, and the use of masculine singular pronouns (he/him/his) to refer to indefinites and generic nouns. (Language change, sex roles and language, language attitudes, language planning, pronouns)

[1]An earlier version of this paper was given at the 1975 Summer meeting of the Linguistic Society of America.

1. INTRODUCTION

The revival of the feminist movement in this country in recent years has already had undeniable impact upon our society. And it promises--or threatens (depending upon your point of view)--still greater, long-reaching changes in our institutions: our government, our employment, our education, and even our homes and families. Fundamental to all these changes, however, is a change in attitude--a different way of viewing and thinking about women, a different way of thinking about ourselves.

Our thinking and our subconscious attitudes and prejudices are reflected in our language. A primary goal, then, of feminism is not only to raise people's conscious awareness of the extent of our culture's prejudices against women but to make us aware also of how these prejudices are embodied in and expressed through our language. For our language is in fact sexist--male oriented and male dominated. Examples abound. We concentrate here on three major areas and three kinds of change proposed by the feminist movement.

2. FEMALE TITLES: Ms. VS. MISS AND MRS.

The first of these changes involves the use of the title Ms. as a replacement for both Miss and Mrs. A number of feminists have been outspoken in their condemnation of the sexism implicit in the continued use of Miss and Mrs. For example, the editors of An Intelligent Woman's Guide to Dirty Words, Volume One of The Feminist English Dictionary, include

the title Miss as an example of a 'dirty' patriarchal stereotype; and Dorothy Hage (1972:7), writing in Aphra, sums up the feminist attitude towards the title Mrs. by saying,

> When a married woman uses her husband's full name, as in 'Mrs. John Smith', it is as if her entire identity is summed up in that 's' tagged onto the man's name. One is tempted to call her 'John', in the hope of pointing out to her that she does have at least a first name and an identity apart from that of her husband.

The editors of Ms. magazine (1972:4), in an opening editorial in the first edition of that magazine, wrote,

> Now Ms. is being adopted as a standard form of address by women who want to be recognized as individuals, rather than being identified by their relationship with a man. After all, if Mr. is enough to indicate 'male', then Ms. should be enough to indicate 'female'. . . The use of Ms. isn't meant to protect either the married or the unmarried woman from social pressure--only to signify a female human being. It's symbolic, and important. There's a lot in a name.

On this front, feminists appear to be making some gains. The Barnhart Dictionary of New English Since 1963 includes Ms. as one of its entries, defined simply as an 'abbreviated title used instead of Miss or Mrs.' (1973:303) And as one

of their illustrations of its use, the editors quote from an article in the New York Post, written by Harriet Van Horne, called 'Nixon and Children':

> As an old-fashioned man, the President prefers the old conventions, such as addressing a woman as 'Miss' or 'Mrs.' rather than the new, liberated, statusless 'Ms.'--not pronounced 'Muss' or 'Mess', as certain fastidious male chauvinists have suggested.
>
> No, for reasons that elude me, 'Ms.' is pronounced 'Miz'. Miz as in Miz Scarlett, misanthrope and Miserere mei Deus, which we may translate today as 'God have mercy on all us women' because our President isn't likely to.

Anecdotal evidence of the use of Ms. is abundant: a TV ad that begins 'Mr. America and also Ms.', a department in a major clothing store named 'Ms. Coats and Suits', a beauty parlor called 'Ms. G. Coiffures', an advertisement on a motel marquee 'Half Price Ms. Drinks', a popular song by John Lennon called 'Move Over Ms. L'. That the use of Ms. is not restricted to the United States is evidenced too by the fact that in South Australia the Permier 'decreed that henceforth all the state's 600,000 women will be addressed as "Ms." in all official correspondence'. (reported in the Dayton Daily News, March 25, 1975) And as any female can testify to, increasingly more and more personal and business

correspondence, application forms, travel tickets, etc., are addressed to Ms. rather than to Miss or Mrs.

There is still resistance to and ridicule of the use of Ms., however, particularly from older women. For example, one woman writing in response to a move by the federal government 'toward the official use of the term Ms.' complained,

> The practice [of using Ms. routinely] is an offense against most women inasmuch as the term conveys connotations of feminist ideology . . . The form Ms. should not routinely and gratuitously be placed before the names of women who may object, and there is no question that many women do object to this practice. (quoted in Causey 1975)

At present, then, Ms. functions as an alternative form that some women choose instead of Miss and Mrs. This fact is reflected in the practice adopted by some organizations and businesses of listing all three female titles on application forms, etc., thus leaving the choice of identification to the female herself. For example, an application for membership in the Modern Language Association for 1975 included all the following titles: Mr., Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., and Prof., with the accompanying instructions to 'check one for use in mailing address'.

What happens if you check none of the above or indicate in some other way that you prefer not to use a title? A

recent experience of our own (this was during a telephone interview with a reporter from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch) indicates that if a woman refuses to be labeled either Mrs. or Miss, if she says, in answer to the question 'Is that Mrs. or Miss?' 'I prefer to be called by my name', she's going to appear in print as Ms. (Men, of course, in the same item of print will be referred to without titles and by last name only.)

We performed a statistical study of the use of Ms. in print by counting its use in advertisements in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Pre-name titles for both males and females are relatively common in the Chronicle, yet there is a striking difference between their use by males and by females. Table 1 shows that of the 138 men advertising positions in the April 7, 1975, issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, 43 percent used no pre-name titles at all. This compares with only 23 percent of the women without pre-name titles. And more significantly, only 4 of the 138 men, less than 3 percent of them, referred to themselves as Mr. Yet 20 percent of the women referred to themselves as either Miss, Mrs., or Ms. It is true, however, that Ms. outnumbered Mrs./Miss by two to one; yet the numbers of women we are talking about are very small (4 out of 6). It is also noteworthy that one of these women who called herself Ms. also referred to herself as a chairman.

TABLE 1

Chronicle of Higher Education, April 7, 1975, Advertisements:

Pre-name title	Male (n = 138)	Female (n = 30)
none	43.2%	23.3%
academic title	53.2	56.7
Mr.	2.9	----
Miss/Mrs.	---	6.7
Ms.	---	13.3
religious title	0.0	0.0

TABLE 2

Chronicle of Higher Education, April 5, 1976, Advertisements:

Pre-name title	Male (n = 198)	Female (n = 47)
none	39.4%	28.7%
academic title	53.5	47.9
Mr.	4.0	----
Miss/Mrs.	----	10.6
Ms.	----	10.6
religious title	3.0	2.1

The figures for the 1976 issue of the Chronicle (Table 2) are similar in some ways to 1975 but there are differences as well. For one, the percentage of males using no pre-name titles is down slightly; in contrast the percentage of females with no pre-name titles is up. The corresponding drop in the percentage of women using academic titles is more marked. These two changes taken together suggest a move away from the use of titles by women. Ms. in the 1976 issue is used exactly the same number of times as Mrs./Miss together. The percentage of all three of these titles is up, but only very slightly from 1975. The 21 percent of the females who identify

themselves in this way contrasts again sharply with the 4 percent of the males who use the title Mr.

3. GENERIC 'MAN' AND ITS COMPOUNDS

There has been a great deal of feminist criticism regarding the use of generic man and its compounds. Typical are the remarks and suggestions by Burr, Dunn and Farquhar:

> When told that 'men by the thousands headed west, . . . the young reader is unable to form a mental image which includes females. . . . Similarly, when informed that man-made improvements have raised America's standard of living . . . a child cannot be expected to develop the concept that females as well as males have participated in the developmental process. (1973:6)

What Burr, Dunn, Farquhar and others suggest as a replacement for 'generic man and men' is the use of neutral non-sex-related terms, such as persons, people, human beings, and individuals.

Some change has taken place in this area. The U. S. Department of Labor has rewritten its dictionary of occupational titles, and some professional journals and organizations have changed or are changing their editorial policies. For example, the journal titled Modern China includes in its editorial style sheet an item labeled 'male-oriented language', which reads

> Do not refer to sexually mixed groups of people by using male-oriented words (e.g. 'men', 'man', 'brothers') and do not personify such groups as male (e.g. the Chinese peasant's view of his nation's past . . .).

Similarly, the National Council of Teachers of English recently adopted for use in the preparation of its publications and correspondence a set of guidelines for 'nonsexist use of language'. The first section of those guidelines reads

> Although man in its original sense carried the dual meaning of adult human and adult male, its meaning has come to be so closely identified with adult male that the generic use of man and other words with masculine markers should be avoided whenever possible. (1975)

Furthermore, a number of other major publishing companies have also already devised sets of guidelines themselves, for example McGraw-Hill; Scott, Foresman; Holt, Rinehart and Winston; and MacMillan. These sets of guidelines also advocate the use of alternative expressions such as people, persons, and humans for the use of man and men. For example, the McGraw-Hill guidelines suggest instead of fireman, fire fighter; instead of mailman, mail or letter carrier; instead of chairman, presiding officer, chair, head, leader, coordinator, or moderator. (1972:13)

In our study of the use of man and its compounds we have looked in particular at alternatives to chairman, specifically chairperson, chair(er), and head. One ready source of examples of these terms is the advertisements for academic positions in both the MLA Job Information lists and the Chronicle of Higher Education. Table 3 includes comparative statistics taken from the March 1970, February 1974, February 1975, and February 1976 MLA Job Information lists.

TABLE 3

MLA Job Information List Advertisements:

Title	Mar. 1970 (n = 136)	Feb. 1974 (n = 1021)	Feb. 1975 (n = 1004)	Feb. 1976 (n = 413)
Chairman	83.8%	87.7%	81.8%	78.9%
Other (total)	16.2%	12.3%	18.2%	21.1%
Head	16.2%	9.3%	9.5%	10.7%
Chairperson	-----	2.2%	7.5%	8.7%
Chairwoman	-----	0.2%	0.5%	0.2%
Chair	-----	0.7%	0.8%	1.5%

In the 1970 list there were no examples of alternatives to chairman other than head. In contrast, there were 22 examples of chairperson in the 1974 list, 75 examples in the 1975 list and 36 in the 1976 list. (Although the number of examples of chairperson is less for 1976 than for 1975, the percentage is higher because the total number of advertisements was much less in 1976.) Chair, and its apparent abbreviations (Ch. and Chr.), is relatively insignificant; so is chairwoman. Head has decreased in frequency from 16 percent of the total in 1970 to around 9 or 9.5 percent in the 1974 and 1975 lists and up slightly again in 1976 to around 11 percent.

On the other hand, although the percentage of chairman itself is only slightly changed from 1970 to 1976 (78.9% in 1976 vs. 83.8% in 1970), the ratio of chairman to chairperson has changed markedly, from 40 to 1 in 1974 to approximately 9 to 1 in 1976. Inroads into the use of chairman seem therefore to be sure, though slow.

This trend is even clearer, looking at the Chronicle of Higher Education. In the April 7, 1975, issue of the Chronicle 73 percent of those advertising positions referred to themselves as chairmen. (This figure disregards titles which are not comparable in rank, for example dean.) Table 4 shows that in 1975 head had the same rate of occurrence as in the MLA Job Information List. Chairperson was more common than in the Job List, constituting nearly 18 percent of the total.

TABLE 4

Chronicle of Higher Education Advertisements:

Title	April 7, 1975 (n = 85)	April 5, 1976 (n = 120)
Chairman	72.9%	60.8%
Other (total)	27.1%	39.2%
Head	9.4%	7.5%
Chairperson	17.6%	30.8%
Chairwoman	0.0%	0.0%
Chair	0.0%	0.8%

The following year chairman is down to 60.8% and chairperson up to 30.8%; the ratio of chairman to chairperson having changed from 4 to 1 to 2 to 1 in just one year.

We, therefore, see a growing trend toward the use of a non-sex-designating alternative (specifically chairperson) to the term chairman in academia. Chairman is entrenched still, however, and even many academic women say that they prefer its use to any alternative, arguing sometimes in a linguistically sophisticated way that the derivative -man is far removed from the free form man, or more frequently simply dismissing chair and chairperson because they are accustomed to the term chairman or because they think the alternatives 'sound funny'. A concurring negative view from outside academia has been expressed by William F. Buckley, Jr. (1974): 'That there are grown people in the world who go around saying things like "chairperson" is testimony not to bisexual attempts to create equality, but to transexual resolutions to sound stupid'. Obviously, there is still much prejudice to overcome before chairperson is widely accepted.

4. GENERIC PRONOUNS

In at least one other area, however, there is substantial ongoing linguistic change coinciding with (though not necessarily precipitated by) feminist criticism of the language. This concerns the matter of generic singular pronoun

use.[2] Feminist criticism of the use of he/his/him to refer to any individual, person, or human being has been most strident and has consequently resulted in the concoction by various feminists of different sets of androgynous or common-gender pronouns. For example, Dana Densmore (1970:3-4) argues that the 'old words will have to be scrapped entirely'. She advocates instead the use of a 'new' nominative case she (arguing that the one word contains both the old he and the old she), objective case herm, and possessive case heris ([hɜs]). Other suggestions for new sets of pronouns include co for both nominative and objective case and cos for possessive case (by Mary Orovan); ve, as nominative, ver, as objective, vis, as possessive (by Varda One); and tey, as nominative, tem, as objective, and ter, as possessive (by Miller and Swift). The latter argue that besides being 'a matter of common sense and clear communication . . . in the long run the problem of the generic person pronoun is a problem of the status of women'. (1972:7)

The question is whether any of these newly devised sets of pronouns have caught on in general use. And with the

[2]Ann Bodine, in a recent article (1975) concerning this 'androcentrism' of English pronoun use, distinguishes between 'sex-indefinite' he and 'singular' they. The non-sexist 'singular' they she traces back to earlier periods of the language, so that it actually represents an older usage that has been retained in speech. The change we are discussing is not, therefore, an innovation in the language, but merely the spreading of a casual speech pattern to more formal speech styles and to writing, where traditionally it has been stigmatized by prescriptive grammar.

exception of a few feminist writers (one example is Alison Jaggar who published an article titled 'On Sexual Equality', (1974) which uses the pronouns tey, ter, and tem) the answer is no.

What does seem to have caught on in writing--in advertisements, newspapers, magazines, correspondence, and even in some people's careful speech--is a more extensive use of the dual constructions he and she, his and her, him and her, and more rarely even she and he (or s/he), her and his, and her and him. For example, the Union Graduate School catalog dated January 1975 consistently uses the dual constructions, sometimes with the masculine pronoun first and sometimes with the feminine pronoun first: 'A student devotes a significant portion of her/his graduate program to the testing, developing of skills and ideas to effect his/her personal and professional growth'. (1975:37)

Opposition to dual pronoun constructions is, however, frequently as loud as or louder than objections to the use of -person compounds. Even some who claim to be otherwise sympathetic to the feminist movement balk at efforts to desex the pronominal system--particularly if it is their own use of pronouns which is called into question. The typical method of argument of such individuals is a reduction to absurdity, often illustrated by a rewriting of some Biblical passage with dual pronoun constructions. For example, Edward Sagarin,

writing in the Humanist (1976:24), complains of a nightmare he experienced, finding himself reading from the book of Genesis as follows: 'So God created a human being in His/Her own image, in the image of God created (S)He him and her'. Sagarin then pleads with feminist copyeditors to 'stop the murderous assault on the English language. Admit that it has all been one big ms.take'. (1976:25)

Apparently Sagarin and others need not worry about the spread of the use of dual pronouns. The constructions are extremely rare if not nonexistent in casual speech.

In contrast are the so-called plural forms--they, their, them--which are quite commonly used to refer to generics in speech, particularly the indefinites everybody, somebody, anybody, etc. That the use of these 'plural' forms is also common in writing is evidenced by the fact that practically every handbook on English usage includes a warning to students to avoid this use when writing formal papers.[3] The use of the plural forms to refer to generic singulars is therefore stigmatized, and even many feminists seem to accept without question the condemnation of the use of the plural forms.

[3]A notable exception is Cowan and McPherson's Plain English Please, which includes the following advice: 'If you want to stop assuming that women don't matter you'll try to avoid using "he" and "his" unless you mean men only. . . If "everybody" seems inevitable, forget the niceties and write "their", just as you would say it. . . Or you can fall back on "his or her", if you're really nervous about it. But just as careful writers avoid using such derogatory words as Polack, nigger, or honky, unless they deliberately want to be offensive, so careful writers will avoid sexist language'. (1976:420)

For example, Miller and Swift, in their article 'Desexing the Language' (1972:7) write, 'It is one thing for a student to announce in assembly that "Anybody can join the Glee Club as long as they can carry a tune", but when this patchwork solution begins to appear in print, the language is in trouble'. Ironically these same women also write, 'Perhaps a clue to the solution is to be found in people's persistent use of _they_ as a singular pronoun'. Indeed this seems to be the case.

We have done a statistical count of the use of generic pronouns, using as our source interviews published in Studs Terkel's book _Working_. The figures in Table 5 represent the use of pronouns to refer to generic nouns and to indefinites by 24 different individuals divided equally according to sex, class, and age: 12 males, 12 females; 12 working class informants and 12 middle class informants; 12 young (defined here as 30 or younger) and 12 middle-aged informants.

First of all, there is a significant difference in the use of plural vs. singular pronouns to refer to indefinites (like _everyone_) as opposed to generic nouns (like _a person_). Nearly 70 percent of the time the singular pronoun (usually _he/his/him_ but occasionally _she_ or _her_) was used to refer to generic nouns. In direct contrast, the plural pronouns (_they/their/them_) were used 75 percent of the time to refer to indefinites. Both sex and social class are also significant

factors in the use of the plural forms vs. the singular. Females consistently favored the use of the plural forms more than males, and working class (WC) informants used the plural forms more frequently than middle class (MC) informants, particularly in reference to generic nouns. The age of the informants did not, however, prove significant.

TABLE 5

Generic Pronouns in Studs Terkel's Working

1. Reference to Generic Nouns (in %; n = 65)

		Male		Female		Totals		Totals		Grand
Pro.	No.	WC	MC	WC	MC	Male	Female	WC	MC	Total
Sg.		7.7	26.2	10.8	24.6	33.9	35.4	18.5	50.8	69.3
Pl.		4.6	6.2	12.3	4.6	10.8	16.9	16.9	10.8	27.7
Sg./Pl.		1.5	1.5	----	----	3.0	----	1.5	1.5	3.0

2. Reference to Indefinites (in %; n = 40)

		Male		Female		Totals		Totals		Grand
Pro.	No.	WC	MC	WC	MC	Male	Female	WC	MC	Total
Sg.		7.5	5.0	5.0	2.5	12.5	7.5	12.5	7.5	20.0
Pl.		15.0	17.5	30.0	12.5	32.5	42.5	45.0	30.0	75.0
Sg./Pl.		---	2.5	----	2.5	2.5	2.5	----	5.0	5.0

We assume, then, from this preliminary study of the speech of 24 informants that there is evidence of increasing use of the traditional plural pronouns (they/their/them) to refer to both indefinites and generic nouns. This use of the plural is more advanced in the case of the indefinites; it is more advanced among females than males and more advanced among working class informants than middle class informants. There is no evidence from this study, however, that any of

the newly proposed androgynous pronouns are being used by anyone in everyday speech or that the dual constructions, such as *he or she*, are used in everyday speech.

5. CONCLUSION

We have surveyed three areas where the English language is sexist, the remedies suggested to eliminate the sexism, and the current state of the language in these three areas. To linguists, it is obvious that the suggested remedies will not have equal success in becoming part of the language. A new lexical item, such as *Ms.*, which fills a slot in the lexicon, can more easily catch on; *Ms.* has in fact already become part of the language. Replacing a bound form like the *-man* of compounds is more difficult. *Chairperson* is becoming more widely used, but *chairman* is still used predominantly. Attempting to introduce new pronouns, however, has even less chance of success. It is highly doubtful that pronouns like *tey/ter/tem* will ever become a regular part of the language. The dual pronoun constructions seem to be becoming more common in formal writing and speech situations; however, it is also doubtful that they will become common in speech. Rather, the trend with respect to pronouns seems to be a relaxing of the number concord rule so that the non-sexist plural forms are used also for the singular, particularly when the meaning is more than one, such as is the case for generic nouns and for indefinites like *everybody* and *each*.

Finally, in linguistic and anthropological discussions of sexism and language, it is usually pointed out that the problem is in the culture, not in the language. A typical example is Peter Farb's comments in Word Play (1974:164):

> The fact is that language merely reflects social behavior and is not the cause of it. The problem of woman's status in English speaking communities will not be solved by dismantling the language--but by changing the social structure. Even if it were in our power to legislate changes in the platitudes of words, the attitudes would nevertheless remain.

We believe, however, that it is necessary to go beyond this kind of statement of the obvious. Advocating changes in the language can help change the attitudes and the social structure. Using new, nonsexist expressions can raise the level of awareness and thus help to bring about change in the society.

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